

Abstract

(R)evolution in the operating environment: International Organizations and the Ukraine Crisis

John David Young, PhD

Royal Military College of Canada, National Defence Academy, Canada

young-j@rmc.ca

The challenges associated with planning and implementing operations in the context of hybrid warfare and complex emergencies in the early twenty-first century have increasingly included devising appropriate responses to the increased saliency of international organisations within theatres of conflict. Indeed, the dominant Western policy discourse holds that the imperatives for effective comprehensive approaches to operational success, which integrate whole-of-government type interventions with more traditional and time-tested applications of armed force, require close and ongoing interactions with a range of non-state actors across the spectrum - from humanitarian NGOs to private-sector contractors. Again in this view, international organisations occupy the forefront of contemporary operational environments given that they are considered to be the most significant non-state actors in terms of impact on conflict processes and eventual conflict outcomes. What is less certain, however, is the direction in which power and influence flow in the State-International Organization relationship. On the one hand, there is a strongly argued realist view that, as John Mearsheimer has observed, “What is most impressive about institutions, in fact, is how little independent effect they seem to have had on state behavior.” (*The False Promise of International Institutions, International Security*) On the other hand, the liberal view holds that, as Kenneth Abbott and Duncan Snidal have posited “States use formal international organizations to manage their everyday interactions and more dramatic episodes, including international conflicts.” (*Why States Act through Formal International Organizations, Journal of Conflict Resolution*) To integrate these debates concerning the relative distinctiveness or autonomy of international organizations (IOs) in relation to their State memberships, the Paper juxtaposes the respective realist and liberal arguments to enable improvements in forecasting for operational purposes. Further, it anchors this component of the analysis in the theoretical and normative literature respecting global-governance and, more particularly, regional-security questions. By adopting this analytical vantage point, the working hypothesis of this Paper then tests the relative empirical merits of the realist-liberal dichotomy in the State-IO relationship by scrutinizing the roles and functions of four organizations central to the evolution of the Ukraine crisis: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union (EU).

Why select these IOs for evaluation? In addition to the UN, the three regional organizations instanced here (the OSCE still being the CSCE until 1994) constituted the essential features of the early post-Cold War European security architecture identified by then-Secretary of State James Baker in a series of foundational addresses. In fact, this quadripartite organizational structure has deeper roots still, being an indirect historical outgrowth of the Helsinki Consultations (1972) and ultimately the Helsinki Final Act (1975). They continued as integrated elements of a more encompassing security mechanism following the Dayton Agreement (November 1995) and have now evolved into a functioning matrix within the current conflict centered on Ukraine.

Accordingly, it has become imperative, for all concerned, both at the strategic and operational level to take into account the likely actions and policy prescriptions of these international institutions as the Ukrainian Crisis plays itself out. The Paper analyzes the respective strengths and weaknesses of each organization in terms of their demonstrated capacities to minimize escalatory behaviors, on the one hand, and enhance the prospects for effective conflict management and resolution, on the other. Within this analytical framework, the informing premise supporting the research focus is that security-sector professionals, including the Officer Corps of State Actors, are confronted today with a rapidly evolving – *in keeping with the Conference theme, should we say ‘revolutionary’ rather than evolutionary* - operational environment in major part owing to this heightened importance of non-State actors. In turn, this leads to conceptual confusion when dealing with traditional Westphalian understandings of conflict dynamics, and operational planning, whereby States are presumed to be the primary actors in conflict scenarios. Thus the Paper takes particular care to weigh the impact of national objectives and policy preferences when analyzing UN, NATO, OSCE and EU actions, especially to the extent that these actions have influenced the conflict’s operational environment. Policy differences within the key memberships of all four organizations discussed here have resulted in inconsistent prescriptions and lack of cohesion at the level of Member-State collective action, both phenomena being of consequence for field operations. Among a wide range of issues in this regard, one could cite significantly different responses to the MH17 shoot-down, humanitarian initiatives, or even estimates of orders of battle. The European Leadership Network’s (ELN) November 2014 Policy Brief, *Dangerous Brinkmanship*, drew attention to the high number of close military encounters involving Russian and Western militaries (for example, “close violations of national airspace, emergency scrambles, narrowly avoided mid-air collisions, encounters at sea, simulated attack runs,...”).

These high-risk events, of course, have been widely reported and frequently commented upon by a range of reputable sources over the course of this crisis. What is important to bear in mind in the context of this Paper’s analytical focus and practical relevance at the operational level, is the disposition of policy recommendations to hone in on international organizations, particularly at the regional level, as loci and fora for conflict-management efforts and operational initiatives. Representative in this regard is the ELN’s call for reinvigorated attention to the possibilities offered by the OSCE, EU and NATO frameworks. As indicated above, the ELN provides a quite eloquent example of a liberal institutionalist approach to problem-solving in conflict situations. Through a closely examined assessment of the conflict’s principal events and actor objectives, this Paper concludes by weighing the operational saliency of the liberal view, via scrutiny of the roles of international organizations during the ongoing crisis, against the more cautionary realist perspective that holds, like Mearsheimer, that “misplaced reliance on institutional solutions is likely to lead to more failures in the future.”